

The Surface of a Large-Scale Photograph

Kang Hong-Goo (Artist)

1.

Kwon Sun-Kwan's work is a chronicle of urban identity. It shows his view of a city in continual change. He was a humble country boy who became interested in Photography while conscripted to the army. Kwon's photographs demonstrate the process of his adaptation to the megalopolis, Seoul.

Kwon's work reveals an ability to see and an attitude toward the nature of the city. In his early, rough-printed black andwhite photographs, Kwan concerned himself with documenting the movement of city-dwellers in the subway system and underpass. This was a psycho-analysis of the people he found, and of the artist himself. The city was for him a place to find a myriad of people, working to achieve their desires.

He then embarked on a more objective document of the city, departing from the representation of himself and other people, in a work composed of spaces relating to city-dwellers: buildings, roads and cars: physical components and their relationships which are of essential significance to the nature of a city.

But Kwon's work has now increased in corporeality, moving beyond a mere documentary image. Due to this corporealityand its material enormity, Kwon's new large-scale Photography radiates a sense of coldness and neutrality with fetishistic undertones.

2.

Kwon's new photographs echo methods of composition used in High Renaissance painting. Paintings from the 16th century, near the culmination of the Renaissance, are characterized chiefly by linear perspective,bilateral symmetry, overwhelming canvas and uniform line delineation. As Heinrich Wolfflin stated,Renaissance paintings contrast sharply with Baroque paintings.

- Here layers of paint seem to overlap and exude a sense of space, as if all objects within share equal importance. They also maintain an Albertian perfection in which equilibrium fails if something is subtracted or added.

But the effect of perspective Kwon's new photographs emit is not identical to that of High Renaissance art: The illusory depth of space generated by perspective is less pronounced,

and the sense of emptiness is more noticeable. Also his photographs are invested with a romantic grandeur, and a feeling of Pop Art coolness and neutrality, found in work by Edward Ruscha and Andy Warhol. All these similarities, appearing at once eclectic rather than consistent and uniform, are something postmodern.

Each photograph by Kwon also differs from conventional art, which is timeless, as they will eventually vanish into hyper-reality, a postmodern visual environment awash with photographic imagery. As such they hold no sense of originality; they can be infinitely reproduced, and thus hold no sense of unique temporal aura. To overcome this problem; to gain a sense of temporality and fulfill its aim to replace painting, Kwon's photography aims to generate affect through the gigantic presence of materiality.

Kwon's gigantic photography has no truck with the representation of reality, asserted by early and modern photographs, and thus seems vacuous. But it stirs our possessive instinct with three elements: typography a desire to replace painting and a sense of realism, presented through an overwhelming sense of grandeur. They behave like real objects, and in competition with display devices such as TV, computer monitor, LCD and PDP, offering clearer, higher-definition images on a large scale, Kwon's gigantic photography is also required to offer even more detailed gigantic images. Photography is no longer regarded as an unrivaled medium for the exactitude of images.

In the early days of photography, the camera was small, and carried by the body. Its aim was to merely document scenes within representative images big or small. In contemporary photography, photographers face the meaninglessness of representation, so the use of bigger photographs is required. There is a belief Photography has lost all ability to represent, because of its place amid the hyper-reality. So photographers have come to believe in the size and the vividness of photographs, and so photographs are bigger, hold a sense of emptiness, and are more concerned with materiality and not representation.

3.

All the pictures elaborately presented ?including other photos which conceal the fact that they are intentionally presented ?convey some narratives, as does a film. Such narratives are also discovered in Kwon Sun-Kwan's work but they are hidden under its surface. This is why the viewer first notices its surface images rather than any narratives.

We should keep in mind the titles of his pieces to confirm such narratives. As Roland Barthes pointed out, the titles set by the artist play a part to instruct what we have to see in the pictures. We, of course, do not follow the instruction. What we view is the buildings and urban spaces that occupy the entire surface of his work.

The attitude Kwon Sun-Kwan takes is that his pictures reflect nothing but the world that is

seen through his eyes. What's noticeable in his photographs is perhaps this point. What's embodied in his work is the imagery itself which independently exists with no any connection with others. What I saw in his work was not any narratives and tangible buildings but the imagery itself appeared on the surface. Buildings, streets, cars and the sky look empty and this emptiness is all of his pictures.

His work is reminiscent of Andy Warhol's reference to the surface. Kwon's surface differs from Warhol's in that it distracts our gaze rather than drawing it. Accordingly, Kwon's attempt to convey any narratives comes to fail and the failure is truly intended by him.